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Afterword

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Staged Folklore is an account of a remarkable cultural intervention. Its topic, *Siamsa Tíre*, stands out for scholarly attention in several interlinked ways, all of them traced in this volume. From one perspective, *Siamsa Tíre* represents a significant Irish phenomenon, with a distinct history that is richly uncovered here. And doing so is timely, even urgent, given the advanced age of some of those involved. Working with such figures is also particularly appropriate when dealing with theatrical history, where the written word (such as the play script) may be less of an endpoint, less culturally authoritative, than the actual performance, and where facets that provide so much of the vigour of live performance itself, such as dance steps, costuming, lighting or instrumental timbre, are barely recorded in such documentation. Recording this diverse set of materials and sources as history preserves it for future reflection and celebration; it also offers a chance for today's artists and policymakers to draw well-informed inspiration from it, both for redeployment in their own practice and for devising new visions for future cultural policy.

Meanwhile, the story of *Siamsa Tíre* provides an example of a move found in so many postcolonial settings, where new cultural institutions were established – or older ones transformed – to recuperate for the new nation a means of projecting an identity that appeared duly separate from those provided by the previous imperial centre. For many newly independent nations, this proved difficult: empire had left behind a full set of institutions with a direct stake in preserving and naturalising imported cultural expressions, and an elite population inclined to perceive such productions as modern and cosmopolitan. Years of overseas cultural dominance had trained large swathes of the population to believe that indigenous cultural expressions were rural and backward, quite irrespective of their unquestionably patriotic credentials. In some cases, such cultural expressions were even cited as part of the reason why the people had succumbed to foreign aggression in the first place. Recuperating such expressions was, in Raphael Samuel's acidic summary of writings by journalist Neal Ascherson, at best "a consolatory myth, entropy in holiday dress" (1994, 262; see further Neale's chapter in this volume).

The Irish example treated here, like many around the world, is one that draws on the symbols and practices of subaltern, regional traditions, proposing that new pride can be located (and old pride rediscovered) in their national rootedness. It does so through building a deliberately hybrid art form – fusing together in an explicitly theatrical frame staged representations of music, dance and other inheritances from (and from beyond) traditional lifeways. And yet, it also represents a remarkable instance of an intervention led not by state authorities or economic opportunists, but instead through the vision of a local activist, founder Pat Ahern. If Ahern represents in some ways an elite figure through his church training and interest in learned genres of musical composition, in other senses, he was intimately familiar with the music and dance traditions and agricultural practices that he sought to encapsulate on the theatrical stage. These were his traditions indeed. Furthermore, *Siamsa Tíre*'s hard-earned successes at home led to tours within and beyond the nation, thus also providing a chance to reshape wider overseas perceptions of Irishness. The case of *Siamsa Tíre* in this way raises numerous points of comparison and contrast with other instances worldwide, the consideration of which helps to enrich international knowledge on how and what such movements involve, who they involve, what they project, what they obscure.

The present examination occurs at a moment when researchers have largely moved on from an earlier paradigm that sought out autochthonous cultural authenticity, on the one hand, and opposed it, on the other, with deprecatory (if also insightful) expositions of "fakelore" – typically depicted as either lightweight, sanitised, commercial tat or nationalistic self-congratulation, but sometimes seen as a more sinister bourgeois remediating of working people's cultural expressions (Harker 1985 would be a classic instance from the nearby British context). Instead, a new set of questions has come forward, and now it is increasingly common for researchers to ask how specific actors and agencies develop, embody, sustain or dispute their claims in overlapping regional, national and international arenas. The new paradigm allows the often multiplex histories of inspiration to be better traced and evaluated. For instance, the stimulus of Moiseyev's State Academic Ensemble of Folk Dances of the Peoples of the Soviet Union (as explored by Shay, in Chapter 12) is crucial in providing an international history for the inventiveness of *Siamsa Tíre*.

As part of this refreshed analytical perspective, a new critical vocabulary talks of safeguarding, sustainability and sustainable development, and writers have followed the turn of international bodies like UNESCO away from such ideas as folklore and tradition and towards the decasyllabically challenging formulation of intangible cultural heritage. One of the most

striking outcomes of this new standpoint has been the rethinking of tourism, no longer seen simply as part of the root causes of decaying ways of life, but more roundly recognised as at once both a dynamic force for change and a resource that might be channelled to support the communities that sustain traditional arts. This, of course, was long a fundamental assumption for those running the operation of *Siamsa Tíre* and also ties in with the organisation's dual role as a centre for training and a site where traditional materials are sustained through use –the "live archive", as it is called by Ó Laoire, in Chapter 11.

To these three vectors – the timely documentation of a telling local history, the comparative examination of postcolonial cultural revitalisation projects around the globe, and the fresh critical perspectives opened up by rise of a new analytical viewpoint, I want to point to a fourth rationale for studying the case of *Siamsa Tíre* now. This is more emergent than the other three, but I'd argue that its presence can still be felt throughout the volume. I'm referring to a cluster of values that underpin much of contemporary life and that resonate particularly strongly in the embodied narratives of staged performances, where words, stories, songs, gesture, movement, dance, design, lighting, and other aspects of stagecraft come together to provide new visions of former lifeways. The values in question centre on the idea of spirituality, embracing such factors as ideology, nostalgia, ethics and power. In this sense, spirituality links what O' Connell (following Micheál Ó Súilleabháin) calls, in Chapter 5, "the theology of *Siamsa Tíre*" to the theatre's wider claims to reorder the world morally through its performances. The market is an inherent part of this process, as too is the specific history of a set of migrations that have (and continue to) rid the Irish West of a significant portion of its population. Just one of the echoes of such movements is the temporary return each year of a host of North Americans, many of them in explicit searches for markers of their own historical roots. *Siamsa Tíre*'s enactments offer a transcendental vision that reforms, not simply informs, them, as the viewers. The quasi-magical and romantic generation of spirituality in such performances is linked to the company's strategic reliance upon specific performance venues, techniques and materials, not least a reliance on a language understood by few of its audience members. In this sense, a *Siamsa Tíre* production might be compared to a shamanic spirit quest: the bodies and voices of its actors, musicians and dancers are temporarily animated by ancestral figures whose feelingful expressions speak somewhat mysteriously from the past to those now present.

To offer such a comparison may seem fanciful, metaphoric at best. But, there's an essential speculative aspect to scholarship, just as there is to theatrical performance, which is to say both theatre and research advance propositions about the world we share, and that we turn to

metaphor not simply to describe, but to perform our descriptions. We do so because, as Michelle Kisliuk comments, metaphoric communication both conceptualises emotion and constitutes aspects of our experience (2017, 91). One ramification of this is the thought that researchers, just like performers, have the opportunity to make an ethical contribution to wider society through the ways in which we shape and publicly present our work. That being so, then we surely have much to learn from those in the theatrical domain who have already been so thoughtfully staging their visions for such a long time.

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